

Inequality is the real pandemic

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The current global crisis caused by COVID-19 has highlighted not only the weakness of the hegemonic global economic model, but also the dire need to rethink the defense of human rights from a transnational perspective. For more than 40 years, we have witnessed a setback in the protection and safeguard of human rights, particularly the collective rights of women, workers, and indigenous peoples. Worryingly, inequality [has risen in almost all corners of the world](#), among countries (in the Global North and the Global South) as well as among different [regions within countries](#), which in turn has specifically affected the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights.

Women, workers, and indigenous peoples are some of the most vulnerable groups facing the crisis caused by COVID-19. However, this vulnerability does not stem from this particular context, but rather from structural conditions of precarity and poverty that have worsened in the past decades hindering the enjoyment of their fundamental rights.

Violence against women is a global pandemic, which has exacerbated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the WHO Regional Office for Europe has reported a [60% increase in emergency phone calls and complaints](#) related to intra-family violence in relation to April 2019, and foresees that up to 31 million more cases of gender violence will occur if lockdown measures stay in effect for six months more. In Mexico, the National Network of Women's Shelters has seen a [60% increase in phone calls and shelter requests](#) made by women since lockdown measures began in March 2020. The Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System reported a 20% increase in emergency phone calls related to gender-based violence, and [per day 10 women were murdered in March](#) 2020.

Workers, particularly those coming from countries in the Global South, their right to decent work, and other related rights have been eroded. Globally, corporations have taken advantage of outsourcing and [temporary labor migration programs](#). These models try to obstruct or outrightly deny the employer-worker relationship and, therefore, [the access of workers to labor human rights](#), such as earning a decent wage, having access to social security, and the possibility of collective bargaining and freedom of association, among others.

Regarding indigenous peoples, there has been a continuing effort to privatize their land and territory, particularly in places where their rights to land and property are recognized (collectively or individually as, for example, in Mexico). This situation allows extractive companies to avoid [their corporate human rights due diligence](#), while they also do not fully protect labor rights and cause irreversible damage to the environment.

Unfortunately, women, workers, and indigenous peoples have not been able to appeal to the State for the protection of their rights. On the one hand, because States and their institutions are commonly captured by economic elites; and on the other, because we have seen the rise of authoritarian leaders with a clear agenda in which minorities do not seem to matter, consequence of [the deterioration of the quality of our democratic systems linked, in part, to the rising and exacerbated inequalities](#). From Trumpism in the US, to Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, and Johnson in the UK, current political agendas favor the overexploitation of natural resources and workers' labor power despite the science-based and consistent information that we have on climate change, and now, on the humanitarian crisis that will follow the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, are there still opportunities for the defense of human rights? If so, what is the role that we as human rights defenders can play? In the context of COVID-19, will the current international legal framework and the regional and universal human rights mechanisms be able to address future challenges? Can international solidarity have a real impact on the ground for the defense of human rights? if not, what could be the new alternative paradigm?

Addressing the vulnerabilities faced by women, workers and indigenous peoples will require a radical change in the economic model that will require a political movement unequivocally committed to human rights which, in the best-case scenario, will take decades to build. To this day, what we commonly see is a series of governmental measures seeking to benefit global economic elites through tax breaks to the detriment of the most vulnerable and affected groups.

In this scenario, there might be alternatives where the role of human rights defenders is crucial. The articulation of global social movements advocating for the realization of the right to a clean and healthy environment, the rights to land, food sovereignty, decent work and to social security, to access information, and high-quality education without discrimination, create [opportunities that we need to consider](#) . The current situation will also require alternative forms of coordination between organizations from the Global North and the Global South: a [genuine collaboration](#) addressing the needs of the collectives and organized communities.

This type of collaboration could not only help identify the structural failures of States in the protection of human rights but also set forth effective corporate accountability measures through comprehensive transnational defense strategies. What we seek is to reduce the power imbalance between economic elites and the most vulnerable and impoverished sectors of society, making visible in the international public agenda what these groups have relentlessly stated: "the real pandemic is inequality".

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